

Marlow's Growth in Heart of Darkness

Chang Liu

Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin 300202

Abstract:Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad's masterpiece, is one of the most famous British novels of the 20th century. Marlow's journey to Africa can be taken as the voyage of growth, which was mainly embodied by his self-realization. By analyzing the plot structure of Heart of Darkness, this paper probes into the deep structure of this novel with Marlow's growth as a clue, which is helpful to read the growth theme of this novel.

Keywords:Heart of Darkness; Joseph Conrad; Bildungsroman; Selfhood

Joseph Conrad was born in a province of Poland ruled by Russia in 1857. Under the influence of his rebellious father, he left his country and came alone to Marseilles at the age of 16. In 1878, Conrad joined British merchant marines. In 1889, he travelled across the Congo River and he almost died there. His sea trip across Africa deeply influenced his view of world. In 1894, he ended his 20-year adrift life. These sea trips provided him fruitful material for his ocean novels. Heart of Darkness, based on his trip to the Congo River, implies the degradation of the white man's moral. The novel works to illuminate the key role language plays in building and advertising the self both within the narrative through the characters of Marlow and Kurtz. (Ariniello 46) It tells a story about its narrator Marlow's exceptional adventure to the Congo River in search for an unknown ivory-collector. Finally, Marlow is enlightened by his voyage and ends his quest in a new self-awareness. Bildungsroman was spread to England in the 19th century. Later, initiation gradually became an important theme in British literature. Marcus classified initiation stories into two patterns: one is the initiation process of youth from ignorance childhood to maturity of his mind; the other is a significant self-realization and the realization of life and society. (Rui 17) In Heart of Darkness, it is not only about a voyage into the heart of the Africa but also about the journey to explore the true meaning of the Marlow's selfhood. After the journey Marlow turns from an innocent young man obsessed by the charm of river into a mature and experienced person. In this aspect, Heart of Darkness can be taken as the voyage of growth. Similar to the growth pattern of the protagonist in other novels, the growth pattern of Marlow can be divided into four stages: temptation- escaping and confusion-maturity.

In Bildungsroman, the protagonists are often innocent at the beginning of the story. They are lack of knowledge and experience of the world. As they grow, they may encounter temptations. Because of the lack of experience, they are prone to be tempted by the evil things and leave for quest. Marlow had a dream of exploration for the mysterious and unknown lands when he was just a little child. "When I was a little chap, I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map, I would put my finger on it and say, 'When I grow up, I will go there.'" (Conard 14) These words indicated that young Marlow was not satisfied with his present life and he had a dream of adventure. The big river, like an immense snake uncoiled, fascinated him as a snake would a silly little bird. Because of his dream of hankering after the most blank of the map, Marlow began his career as a seaman on the Dark Continent with the help of his aunt. At that time people, like Marlow's aunt, had a belief that the imperialism was a great enterprise to bring the civilization to the dark land. Under this influence, imperialism was a heavenly mission of civilization in the young Marlow's mind. Urged by his childhood dream, Marlow began his exploration in Africa when he grew up.

Tempted by the unknown fantasy, the protagonist escapes to the outside world. Ambitious about the mission, Marlow set off with a purposeful will as a successor of captain Fresleven. Marlow began his journey on a French steamer. As the French steamer travelled along the African coast, Marlow was deeply impressed by the mysterious scene. Marlow saw "a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma... The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight" (Conard 19) Then he thought of how small the ship and the settlements is compared to the overwhelming vastness of the land. They are "no bigger than pinheads" on the "untouched expanse" of the jungle. His languid life on the ship and the uniform somberness of the coast seems to keep him away from the truth of things. He felt that he stayed "within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion," (Conard 20) the occasional boats of the land which come out from the shore could give him "one a momentary contact with reality". (Conard 20) Only when Marlow catches sight of the black paddlers, he would feel, "I belonged still to a world of straight-forward facts; but the feeling would not last long." (Conard 21) When they arrived at the company's station, Marlow found the incongruity between the imagined and actual image of civilization. He saw the miserable lives of the enslaved natives. "A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved like ants" (Conard 22). "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, the despair" (Conard 24). These senses may remind us of the gloomy Inferno. Then Marlow met the company's chief accountant. His decent and elegant manner looked like a "miracle" (Conard 25) when contrasting with those "black shadows of disease and starvation" (Conard 24). As he goes deeper Marlow gradually uncovered the primitive mystery of the dark land. He felt so disappointed when he saw such brutal deeds of the white people. At this time, the legend of Kurtz seemed a beam of light for his journey. Frustrated by his disappointment, Marlow

transformed his aim from civilizing the barbarous natives into saving for Kurtz.

Confusion is a state of mind characterized by a lack of clear and orderly thoughts and behavior. Innocent protagonists may encounter difficulties and ordeals when they escape to the outside world. Then they will have some confusion about the outside or themselves. The protagonists who experience confusion would not be sure about what they should do and what they should believe. It is an inevitable process of growing up for they usually achieve sudden enlightenment after that. Surrounded by the stillness and silence of the dark land, the steamboat full of Europeans sailed in the midst of the vast African continent. In the vast midst of the jungle, both African and Europe had become a confusion to Marlow. After Marlow encountered several symbolic people and events in Africa, they confused him to consider the significance of his journey across the Congo River. With his journey deeper into the Congo River, Marlow saw the mysteries of dark land, such as the primitive life, the barbarous behaviors, and the brutal deeds of the white people. All these things were so different from what he had imagined. Confused him on his original will to explore this place and civilize its native people. Marlow could not help wondering what and how these blacks from the energetic men to the deathlike? Gradually, confused by the contradiction between his “civilizing mission” and the real situation in Africa, Marlow came to question himself what he really wanted in the dark land.

The protagonist’s initiation mentors are also important elements in Bildungsroman. Everyone’s growth will be influenced by some people around them. The initiation mentors’ influences are external cause of the growth of the protagonist and have great ideological effect on the protagonist. The guidance is helpful for protagonists to solve the confusion. To some extent, Kurtz can be seen as the negative initiation mentor for Marlow. Before he went to Africa, Marlow learned that Kurtz was a “great musician” who had the potential capability to be an excellent politician or a splendid lawyer. In other people’s eyes, he was a universal genius. According to the station account, Kurtz “is a very remarkable person” and “he will be a somebody to the company” (Conard 41). Actually, there are two images in Marlow’s mind. One is the idealized Kurtz; the other is the degraded Kurtz. Marlow was attracted by the idealized Kurtz like a pilgrim in the beginning. As he goes deeper into the Congo River, Marlow gradually disclosed the truth of Kurtz—a cruel and greedy figure. Near Kurtz’s house, he saw half-a-dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls. “The horror! The horror!” (Conard 94) Kurtz’s cry and his death give Marlow a deeper understanding of the darkness of the imperialism and human nature. He denied the European imperialism represented by Kurtz. Marlow’s maturity was marked by his realization of reality and the change of his attitude for colonialism from an ideal one to reality. He came to understand the nature of colonialism.

The progress of growth has always been an important theme in English literature. Over the years, Bildungsroman has shown its significant education on readers. Some researchers have compared *Heart of Darkness* to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, a typical initiation story in 17th century, which shows that initiation is a significant theme in this book. At the end Marlow realizes the true meaning of life. He and other people sit in the boat, drifting on the Thames. Although there is still darkness in reality, Marlow knows how to face it and he knows how to live in this society filled with dangers and lusts. After he explores the truth of the exterior world, Marlow turns his attention to probing into the inner world: the darkness in man’s hearts—the evil in human nature. (Hou 22) Marlow’s journey from the manager’s station into the inner station, from the outside of the jungle into the inside of the jungle exactly reflects the gradual process of a man’s understanding of the world and of his self. Just as what he said in the book: I don’t like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work, —the chance to find yourself. Your own reality— for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. (Conard 39)

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Author Introduction:

Chang Liu (1998-), Female, born in April 1998, Handan City, Hebei Province, postgraduate student of Tianjin Foreign Studies University, British and American Literature